

RKO Reborn

The legendary studio comes back to life

We want to restore RKO to its former glory," says Dina Merrill, a woman who exudes class the way a rain forest emits oxygen. The actress, businesswoman, and daughter of E.F. Hutton and Marjorie Merriweather-Post is the new Vice Chairperson of the legendary Hollywood studio

brand. Merrill and her husband Ted Hartley, CEO and Chairman of RKO Pictures, have taken on a rather daunting task.

Listening to the infectious enthusiasm of this husband and wife team at the head of one of the oldest film companies, I get the feeling they might actually pull it off.

RKO Studios shone like a diamond during the Golden Age of film. It was the studio of the original *King Kong* starring Fay Wray, *Citizen Kane*, *It's a Wonderful Life*,

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Top Hat with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and hundreds of films featuring names like Hitchcock, Cary Grant, and the Marx Brothers attached. By 1939, RKO was producing fifty-two feature films a year and had earned more than 150 Academy Award nominations.

RKO has a goldmine in its library: the rights to more than 1,100 titles and nearly 1,000 unproduced scripts, including several by movie masters Orson Welles, Herman

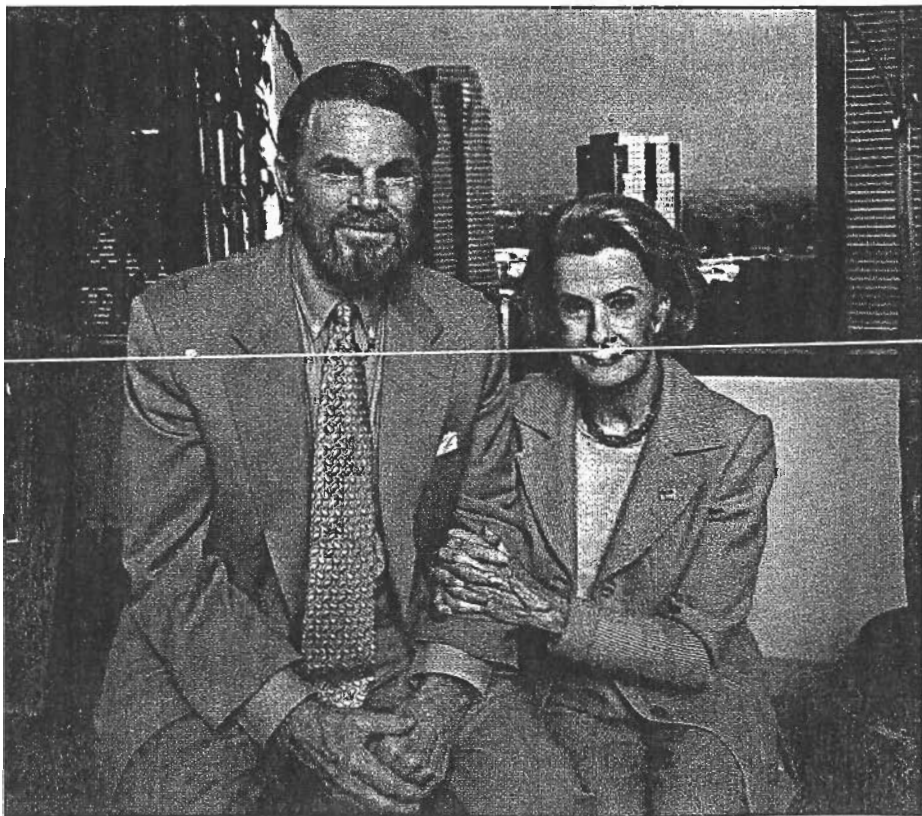
Mankiewicz, and Ben Hecht. It is one of the largest privately-held collections in the world and to capitalize on this inimitable library, Hartley and Merrill have divided the company into four divisions.

RKO Producer's Circle, which will release large-budget films, is founded on Hartley's rather contrarian theory that studios cannot make movies. "Studios can finance films, they can distribute them, they can market them," Hartley says. "But they are not equipped to make movies themselves."

That responsibility falls on the producer, and RKO actively seeks proven producers and attaches them to a script. Hartley, a former actor, naval jet fighter pilot, and Wall Street businessman, says the Producer's Circle division is "a unique way of getting big pictures made by people who have done it before and know how to do it." Upcoming projects include adaptations of the classics *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* and *Suspicion*.

With distribution deals in place, the RKO Radio Pictures division focuses on smaller films with budgets generally under \$30 million. Interestingly, these "independents" are less of an entrepreneurial effort than the Producer's Circle films. "Because we have deals with Miramax Dimension and Fine Line, and they are putting up half the money, they will naturally want some say as to who the producer will be," Hartley explains. "So we make the decision together." Paul Auster's *The Locked Room* is currently in production for RKO Radio Pictures.

"One area where RKO has a chance to do



something special is in the whole arena of cable and television," Hartley continues. Tapping into its formidable archive, RKO Pictures Television is creating and developing movies-of-the-week, sit-coms, drama series, and mini-series for network and cable television. With projects including *The Saint* and the Raymond Chandler classic *Murder My Sweet* already slated, Merrill and Hartley are serious about RKO's TV opportunities.

The fourth division of RKO Pictures, and maybe the most ambitious, is RKO Entertainment. Merrill confides that currently underway is a Broadway production of *Citizen Kane*. The couple would say little about the project, as it's in the early stages of development, but they envision a lavish production in the same vein as *Sunset Boulevard*.

RKO Entertainment plans to expand the brand recognition of RKO (symbolized by the radio tower at the top of the spinning globe, emitting its signal to the universe) with a website and the RKO Hollywood Cantina, a themed restaurant.

In addition to running RKO, the husband and wife team annually award the Hartley-Merrill International Screenwriting Award to a foreign screenwriter. This summer marks the tenth anniversary of the award. The winner is brought to Los Angeles, introduced to agents and filmmakers, taken to Sundance, and attends screenwriting seminars.

The couple have also initiated the Santa Monica-based Story Project, stemming from their interest in how a story can be used as a form of communication. Students in their early teens who have not developed the reading and writing skills appropriate for their age group are encouraged to develop those skills through journal keeping, story classes, and screenwriting classes taught by screenwriters such as Shane Black. The project culminates with the students spending a day on the set of a film in progress.

Even with a formidable challenge ahead of them it's obvious that the Merrill-Hartley merger is both a personal and professional benefit. Merrill describes working with her husband as "fantastic," and Hartley adds: "I feel sorry for executives who do not have somebody to confide in. I wish it for all my competitors. Not my wife, but someone."

— CRAIG A. WILLIAMS